

The Pleasure of the Reader:
Debating Art, Entertainment, and the *Millenium* Trilogy
by
Eleanor Davis

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Abstract

In this thesis, I approach the division between “art” and “entertainment,” through two central questions, the first of which is: what is most typically the basis for a division between “art” and “entertainment”? As reflected in the Oxford English Dictionary definitions, the term “entertainment” implies pleasure on the part of the reader (or audience). “Art,” on the other hand, connotes some seemingly greater *use*, a reflection of our emphasis on utility and denial of pleasure as an acceptable end goal. The difference, it seems, lies in the ability of any given piece to produce a certain types of reading experience in those who encounter it. This answer directly leads into my second question: is reading experience dependent on some quality latent within the text, or does it depend on the reader? If the differences in reading experience are dependent on the reader rather than on the piece itself, any division between into “art” and “entertainment” seems less than helpful as a way to shape discourse.

The first chapter of my thesis will closely examine these two questions, largely using the work of French theorist Roland Barthes. My second chapter will then take these theoretical arguments and apply them to the debate over Steig Larsson’s *Millenium* trilogy, largely focusing on the first book, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2004). Since their release release, critics have debated the status of these books as art, for the most part implicitly framing their discussion with the questions I discuss in my first chapter. Ultimately I will use this debate as an illustrative tool for my theoretical claims, pointing to the ways in which it focuses on reading experience as a deciding factor in determining whether the books are “art,” and, ultimately, the difficulty of applying such a paradigm.

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1. The Debate

Context

The debate about the status of art and its relation to entertainment seems all too familiar, a discussion that has apparently been resolved by theorists who collapse this division, by modern art that uses found objects or even the artist's body as art, and by the advent of social media and new forms of cultural creation. The argument might appear to be settled: there is no division between "art" and "entertainment," at least not anymore, largely because the definition of "art" has come to be completely subjective, dependent on individual reactions to a work. The work of theorists that focused on this issue in the 1960s and 70s--including Roland Barthes'--has gone out of vogue in academic discussion of the past 20 years, perhaps because it is simply not relevant in a world that rejects this division.

In fact, however, a simple trip to the bookstore verifies that this is a division that still, at least implicitly, shapes the ways in which our society approaches reading. Shelving distinctions reflect a division between those pieces that are classified as "fiction" rather than, for example, as "science fiction"; Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, for instance, is often shelved in the "fiction" section despite its conformity to the general genre of science fiction. This choice reflects some sort of implied valuation of Bradbury's writing over others that seem to belong in the same genre (as well as a devaluation of the genre name itself, which is another matter entirely). Book covers, too, reflect this divide, as some books have somber, serious covers, while others have garish drawings and bright colors. The division even affects the size and price of books: some are printed only in "mass market" form--the small, cheap paperbacks often sold in drug stores and airports. Others, however,

get released in large hardcover form, often costing up to three times as much as their mass market counterparts. Clearly, there is some sort of division at work here, one which classifies certain books as more valuable than others, naming them either “art” or “entertainment.” And for me, this division leads to some larger questions: how do we, as a society, decide what is “art” and what is not? How do we delineate some pieces of cultural creation from others?

With further research, the continued space for attention to this topic becomes quite apparent. In his 2003 book *Critical Social Theory*, Tim Dant dedicates an entire chapter to “Art and Entertainment.” In this chapter, he assumes from the start that the two are different categories, referring to them as such throughout. He writes, “art and entertainment are, however, *both* dimensions of culture in which the members of a society are communicating with each other [my emphasis].”¹ Here, in using the word “both,” Dant does not even bother to discuss whether there is a divide between the two categories; rather, he takes that fact for granted and, significantly, assumes his audience will do so as well. He does this again when after explicitly discussing entertainment he notes, “the same sort of circularity is found within art.”² Although the two work in similar patterns, according to Dant they are undoubtedly different from one another. Both these statements come in the second page of his chapter, with no sort of attention paid to that division earlier in the book. Apparently, not only are “art” and “entertainment” definable, separate, categories, but there is also not even a need to discuss that fact. For him, it simply is-- precisely the type of attitude that drives me to focus on the topic in this thesis.

¹Tim Dant, “Art and Entertainment,” *Critical Social Theory: Culture, Society and Critique*, London: SAGE, 2003: 108.

²Dant: 108.

Given the absence of definitions of the categories when they are used--as in Dant--it might be helpful to turn to the dictionary to gain a clearer understanding of the two terms.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, “art” is still officially defined as:

any of various pursuits or occupations in which creative or imaginative skill is applied according to aesthetic principles...; the various branches of creative activity, as painting, sculpture, music, literature, dance, drama, oratory, etc...[;] the expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.³

These definitions cling to the idea that in order for a cultural creation to be considered “art,” it must be created “according to aesthetic principles.” What these principles are, exactly, remains unclear;⁴ nevertheless, the OED definition of the word “art” perpetuates a relatively traditional view that there are principles of some kind that can objectively be used to decide whether or not something can be considered art. The second part of definition builds upon this: defining a piece as “art” is also dependent, at least partially, upon the ways in which we experience it: for “beauty or emotional power.” Significantly, “pleasure” does not seem to be relevant; for the OED, at least, whether or not we enjoy something has no bearing on its classification as “art.” Rather, the experience of the audience is to either appreciate aesthetic qualities or to respond to the beauty or the emotional impact of the piece.

³“Art,” *Oxford English Dictionary* Online, January 2014, Oxford University Press, 6 February 2014, <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/11125?rskey=VVPBSk&result=13142#>>.

⁴ Perhaps creativity? Imagination? Beauty? Even skill? I can only postulate.

To compare this definition of “art” to that of “entertainment” serves to highlight the complexity of the distinction between the two terms. Once again according to the OED, “entertainment” is: “that which affords interest or amusement,” or, alternatively, “a public performance or exhibition intended to interest or amuse.”⁵ Here we have a drastic departure from the definition of “art”: the only thing defining “entertainment” is that it provides us with “interest or amusement”; no “aesthetic principles” come in to play, and no objective categories are suggested. And the “pleasure” that was so noticeably absent from the definition of art comes to the forefront as the single factor deciding whether or not something can be considered entertainment. Although the two terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive by their OED definitions, they do differ drastically in both denotation and connotation. Interestingly enough, this difference seems to rely at least partially on not the creation itself but rather on the way in which we experience the creation, either by appreciating it for its “beauty or emotional power” or by experiencing “interest or amusement.” This suggests that a division between the two in our society is, to some degree, dependent more on the difference in audience experience than anything else.

This difference in definition, however, does not seem to fit well with some others’ understandings of art. To many, the pleasure derived from art is not only worth mentioning, but is in fact the central fact to be considered in a given work. Vladimir Nabokov, for example, writes, “a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss.”⁶ As far as Nabokov is concerned, at least, the “beauty” and “emotional

⁵“Entertainment,” *Oxford English Dictionary* Online, January 2014, Oxford University Press, 6 February 2014, <<http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/62856?redirectedFrom=entertainment#eid>>.

⁶Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, New York: Vintage, 1989: 314-315.

power” of fiction matter only insofar as they afford him what he terms “aesthetic bliss,” certainly pleasure in some guise. This approach, then, calls into question the terms “art” and “entertainment” as they are defined above; for Nabokov, pleasure is central to whether or not he values a cultural creation.

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, published in 1973, Roland Barthes further explores our experience of pleasure while reading a text--a mark of Barthes’ turn to hedonism in the later years of his life.⁷ In this unconventional work, he argues for two distinct forms of art or the experience of it: “bliss” and “pleasure.” In this discussion of bliss and pleasure, Barthes presents the two for the most part as opposites, a claim which has direct implications regarding a strict divide between “art” and “entertainment.” In accordance with the emerging trend, Barthes classifies primarily according to reading experience; in his work, however, the most important factor is the pleasure of the reader, not the beauty or emotional impact of a piece.⁸ Just as in Nabokov’s claim, this approach seems somewhat at odds with the OED definitions of both “art” and “entertainment.”

“Pleasure,”⁹ Barthes writes, “goes straight to the articulations of anecdote, it considers the extent of the text, it ignores the play of language”:¹⁰ it is “the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading.”¹¹ The reading approach described in the is a plot-driven one, a comfortable one; in the original French, the term means something akin

⁷Jonathon Culler, *Barthes*, London: Fontana, 1990: 91.

⁸Barthes sometimes uses “pleasure” as a blanket term to both of the experiences he individually labels “pleasure” and “bliss”; I will discuss this ambiguity further in “Theoretical Frameworks.”

⁹Here I mean the specific “pleasure,” as opposed to “bliss.”

¹⁰Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Trans. Richard Miller, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1973: 12.

¹¹Barthes, *Pleasure*: 14.

to general sexual pleasure.¹² Bliss, however, “skips nothing; it...grasps at every point the asyndeton which cuts the various languages--and not the anecdote: it is not (logical) extension that captivates it...but the layering of significance”;¹³ it is “the text which imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts.”¹⁴ This French term literally translates as “orgasm”¹⁵; ¹⁶ the experience described here, language-oriented, is asocial, uncomfortable, and uncontrollable.

History

Despite its continuing relevance today, this debate has quite a long history. Classical critics such as Aristotle and Horace wrestled with similar questions in their time: how do we decide what falls into the category of “art”? How do we classify works of cultural creations? Aristotle divides poetry by genre, into “tragedy” and “comedy,” claiming that the central difference between the two is that comedy portrays people as worse than they actually are and tragedy portrays them as better.¹⁷ He ties this difference in form to a difference in audience experience, writing, “one should look to tragedy for its own pleasure, not just any pleasure...the poet’s job is to produce the pleasure springing from pity and fear.”¹⁸ According to Aristotle, then, formal tragedy is unique largely because of the particular brand of pleasure it is able to produce in its audience. Here once again we have a

¹²Richard Howard, “A Note on the Text,” Introduction, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975: V-Vi.

¹³Barthes, *Pleasure*: 12.

¹⁴Barthes, *Pleasure*: 14.

¹⁵It does not, however, have the same sort of clinical or scientific associations in French as “orgasm” does in English, nor the dirty connotations of more colloquial terms.

¹⁶Howard: V-Vi.

¹⁷Aristotle, “Poetics,” *Classical Literary Criticism*, By D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008: 53.

¹⁸Aristotle: 68.

link between art and pleasure, with a valuation of a certain type of pleasure over others (one echoed later, perhaps, in Barthes' distinction between pleasure and bliss).

Horace, writing in the first century BCE, divides poetry into two different categories: pleasurable and instructive poetry. He argues that "poets aim either to do good or to give pleasure,"¹⁹ but continues to say, "the man who combines pleasure with usefulness wins every suffrage."²⁰ Although Horace acknowledges pleasure and usefulness as two possible goals, in poetry he holds the combination of the two above either on its own. Here as well, we see an attempt to both classify art and to value some cultural creations over others, once again incorporating pleasure, in addition to use, as a helpful metric for defining art. Horace and Aristotle do not use the same categories or terms so prevalent in our modern debate, but the central questions remain the same.

Some further insight can be found centuries later in the work of the Romantics, in a time that many have pointed to as the beginning of drastic changes in the way Western society viewed, experienced, and related to cultural productions. According to Romantic thinkers, the ideal artistic experience is what they refer to as the "sublime." Coleridge, for example, discusses the nature of art, specifically poetry, in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), proposing, "the reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself."²¹ Here, Coleridge values one type of reading over others, emphasizing the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake. In this work, however, he places the responsibility for this reading experience

¹⁹Horace, "The Art of Poetry," *Classical Literary Criticism*, By D. A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008: 106.

²⁰Horace: 107.

²¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Ed. John Shawcross, Oxford: Clarendon, 1907: 318.

with the reader, rather than the author. The vocabulary is undoubtedly different from that used by Barthes, but both writers could be seen as attempting to explain the same two phenomena, the same two experiences of reading--and, significantly, both seem to devalue the plot-driven approach. The message, from Coleridge at least, is that valuable artistic experience comes through a specific type of reading, a way of approaching the text that alters the type of pleasure a reader might feel.

William Wordsworth similarly explores the nature of pleasure within a text in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), first claiming that "the Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human,"²² and next that "the end of Poetry is to produce excitement in co-existence with an over-balance of pleasure."²³ This approach places more responsibility on the author, perhaps implying that the experience of the sublime is incipient in certain texts and not in others. This is a departure from Coleridge's emphasis on the reader's role in creating the reading experience; both Wordsworth and Coleridge, however, clearly value the sublime over any other reading experience, and both emphasize the pleasure so noticeably absent from the OED's modern definition of art (and yet so strikingly present in its definition of entertainment).

In *A Defense of Poetry*, Percy Bysshe Shelley argues that poetry alone has "the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions,"²⁴ and that "the pleasure resulting from the manner in which [poets] express the influence of society or

²²William Wordsworth, "Preface," *Lyrical Ballads: 1798*, Ed. W. J. B. Owen, London: Oxford UP, 1971: 605.

²³Wordsworth: 609.

²⁴Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry," *Shelley's Prose; Or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, Ed. David Lee Clark, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1954: 297.

nature upon their own minds communicates itself to others and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community.”²⁵ Here, Shelley expands on the idea of the sublime, claiming a discussion between society and the poet that is continuously working reflexively. He begins to address the role of the entire community here, but does not expand further; for the most part, these discussions remain focused on the communication between an author and his readers as individuals. Nevertheless, Shelley’s work provides a synthesis of Wordsworth and Coleridge as he conceptualizes both the reader and the creator as active participants in the creation of the reading experience.

All three emphasize the reading experience of the sublime, thereby valuing certain types of art, or perhaps simply certain ways of experiencing art, over others. As Nancy Easterlin notes: “although Wordsworth and the other Romantic-era poets champion the role of the poet, they generally do so with the ultimate goal of producing (or reproducing) a special effect on the audience.”²⁶ Despite the focus on the poet in Romantic thought, much writing of the movement is focused on the reader’s experience of pleasure and the ways in which the creative imagination is addressed to the reader to stimulate that experience. The work of the Romantics, then, works along with Nabokov and Barthes to highlight the difficulty of separating cultural creations into “art” and “entertainment,” challenging the basis for a division between the two.

New Literary Theory

In *What Good Are the Arts?* (2006), John Carey states: “a work of art is anything that

²⁵Shelley: 278.

²⁶Nancy Easterlin, “The Functions of Literature and the Evolution of the Extended Mind,” *New Literary History* 44.4 (2013): 664.

anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.”²⁷ For Carey, at least, art is no longer a category that can be defined by a stricture of subject matter, aesthetic principles, or creative approaches creative approaches; it is, rather, any creation that any person decides to claim as such (though, as Carey points out, found objects displayed in museums question even the notion that art need be *created* at all). This is a rather drastic argument, of course, but it does not seem so far-fetched in today’s artistic environment.

This past year in *New Literary History*, Terry Eagleton even went so far as to correlate acts such as laughing or playing with children as art, writing, “Most of the most precious activities...are noninstrumental. They contain their goods, ends, grounds, and reasons within themselves, and as such are akin to works of art.”²⁸ Although Eagleton is not arguing that all seemingly noninstrumental activities are necessarily art, he does claim that artistic activities, rather than being their own separate entity, might simply be a subset of the larger category of “noninstrumental activities” such as laughter and playing with children, all of which function in similar ways (which would include some activities traditionally thought of as “entertainment” as well as “art”). The construction of “art” and “entertainment” as diametrically opposed categories has then become irrelevant--art can be, and is, defined as any number of different things in different places by different people. To Carey and Eagleton, at least, this does not seem so much a theoretical confusion as a movement into a deeper understanding of art as a term.

Yet in today’s theoretical discussions, “use” has come to the forefront as a paradigm

²⁷John Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006: 26.

²⁸Terry Eagleton, "Bodies, Artworks, and Use Values," *New Literary History* 44.4 (2013): 564.

through which to examine artistic creation.²⁹ The centrality of this topic is reflected by the 2013 release of an entire edition of *New Literary History* devoted to the concept of use. Most of the pieces included in it argue for the usefulness of the arts, many using evolutionary history to argue that although the arts might seem useless, they have been, in fact, useful to the development of human's cognitive, cultural, and creative abilities. These abilities, in turn, are central in humanity's ability to survive and thrive as a species. In "The Functions of Literature and the Evolution of the Extended Mind," Nancy Easterlin theorizes that literature, as a specific subset of the arts which was developed relatively late in the history of human evolution, is valuable for its own unique reason. It is specifically valuable, she claims, because of its "special contribution to external memory and extended mind."³⁰ According to evolutionary theorists, claims Easterlin, literature allowed humanity to begin storing information externally to our own minds, increasing the amount of information readily available to access. As a result of this ability to store greater amounts of information, humanity could then retain greater problem-solving abilities and access information about problems, and the solutions to them, that other members of the species had encountered in another time and/or place. This led to greater chance of survival for human communities as a whole.

Brian Boyd makes a strikingly similar argument in "Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses,"

²⁹Of course, today's theorists are hardly the first to consider "use" as it relates to art. As stated earlier, Horace valued use as one of the two acceptable end-goals of art (along with pleasure). And in the 19th century, thinkers such as Oscar Wilde (in *The Critic as Artist*), emphasized the *useless* nature for art; for Wilde, "all art is immoral" because it is "emotion for the sake of emotion" rather than "emotion for the sake of action," which is how the so-called "moral" world functions (Wilde 28). The point of view I am referring to as modern here, however, is that art is somehow always useful, or that, at least, it should be. This became a much more common view in the 20th century, and it remains prevalent today, albeit in a different guise.

³⁰Easterlin: 663.

another piece from this edition of *New Literary History*. He begins his piece with a question: “if the arts are useless in immediately practical terms, why has evolution treated them as if they were useful?”³¹ Here, Boyd’s statement, “evolution has treated them them as if they were useful,” means that evolution has encouraged those who practice arts to reproduce, as evidenced by the consistency of artistic practice throughout human society, albeit in a number of different guises.

This question implicitly references the idea of excess that echoes throughout evolutionary theory all the way back to Charles Darwin. When Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he largely failed to account for seemingly useless traits such as peacock feathers.³² In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), however, he theorized that many of these seemingly useless traits developed in order to increase the likelihood that an individual would attract a mate, thereby increasing the chance that the trait would be passed on to the next generation.³³ This original theory about sexual selection has spawned many others about seemingly useless, or even harmful traits, not the least of which is a tendency towards artistic activity.

Boyd, however, argues for a slightly different central use for the arts than Easterlin does, claiming, “what unites the arts is that they all involve cognitive play with patterns...Art holds our attention, not in ways that guide immediate action, but in ways that help us learn to cope with its high and often rapidly shifting patterns of information.”³⁴ According to this theory, art increases an individual’s ability to form and track patterns,

³¹ Brian Boyd, “Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses,” *New Literary History* 44.4 (2013): 577.

³² Charles R. Darwin, Letter to Asa Gray, 3 Apr. 1860, *Darwin Correspondence Project*, University of Cambridge, 2014, Web, 8 Mar. 2014.

³³ Charles R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998.

³⁴ Boyd: 578.

which is central to our high cognitive achievement. Boyd suggests analogies such as young wolves tackling each other in play, which teaches useful hunting skills that are invaluable to adult wolves; in a similar way, art helps young humans to identify patterns in the world around them. In addition, Boyd argues that the arts, especially literature, increase empathy and build a sense of community, crucial to us as largely social animals. Humans depend on the community for survival; according to Boyd, this community and the individual's ability to connect with it seem to be greatly strengthened by literature specifically and art in general.³⁵

When encountering arguments about artistic development based on evolutionary theory, I am not entirely convinced of their worth to a theoretic discussion of art. As Easterlin herself notes, "Not all evolutionary hypotheses can be proven, or proven easily, such as those that apply to mind, complex behaviors, and cultural artifacts, for which there cannot be hard evidence."³⁶ Any argument about a trait as complex and broad as "artistic activity" must rely almost entirely on speculation, as we have no way to prove the validity, or lack thereof, of any particular one.

This does not, however, necessarily prevent such thinking from being helpful in framing theoretical discourse. Easterlin quickly continues to reassure us:

But the framing hypothesis for these more speculative investigations is quite robust. Concerned with survival, evolutionary theory focuses on the functional value of species traits, since organisms that have the physical, psychical, and behavioral traits 'designed' to help them operate efficiently in their environments will endure.

Traits that require significant investments of time and physiological effort, such as

³⁵ Boyd: 579.

³⁶ Easterlin: 662.

bipedal locomotion, are ‘expensive’ in evolutionary terms.³⁷

According to evolutionary theory, then, “expensive” traits, which subtract significantly from the time and energy an organism can devote to other tasks such as finding food, resting, mating, etc., must be more valuable than their considerable cost. Artistic activity, which does not immediately or obviously increase an individual’s chance of survival or reproduction, unquestionably falls into this category. Thus, according to evolutionary theory, although no one might ever be able to prove unquestionably *why* the arts are useful to humanity’s survival, it is relatively certain that they are.

Scope of the Thesis

Given the historical background as well as the continuing relevance of debates about the role and definition of art in the cultural discourse of our time, I have been drawn to focus my thesis on the basis for our classification of art. In doing so, I approach the division between “art” and “entertainment,” at least in reference to pieces of creative writing, through the lens of two central questions. The first is particularly relevant to current discourse: what is most often the basis for a division between “art” and “entertainment”? I postulate that this division is largely centered in a perceived difference in reading experience. As reflected in the Oxford English Dictionary definitions, the term “entertainment” implies pleasure on the part of the reader (or audience). “Art,” on the other hand, connotes some seemingly greater *use* or *purpose*, a reflection of our emphasis on utility and denial of pleasure as an acceptable end goal. This question is inexorably related to second, which also shapes discourse regarding the societal distinction between

³⁷Easterlin: 662.

art and entertainment: is reading experience dependent on some quality latent within the text, or does it depend on the reader? I argue that the differences in reading experience are largely dependent on the reader rather than on the piece itself; therefore, any division of pieces which is based on their perceived ability to produce a certain type of reading experience does not appear helpful.

The second section of my thesis, "Critical Frameworks," will closely examine these two questions, largely using the work of 20th century French theorists Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. A division between art and entertainment as based on a perceived valuation of utility over pleasure appears unfounded. As my earlier analysis of current thinkers, including Nancy Easterlin and Brian Boyd, shows, the logic of evolutionary theory mandates that pleasure must somehow have been useful to the survival of the human species. If this argument stands, then the art/entertainment division as based on a difference between use and pleasure is invalid.

I am inclined to believe, however, that this focus on "use" is merely another reincarnation of a myth of Western society that Foucault focuses on in *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1. In this book, Foucault points to the focus in Western society on framing discussions of pleasure in terms of utility or purpose rather than for its own sake--this emphasis, I believe, is reflected in theoretical discussions centered on use as more valuable than pleasure. If I do, then, reject arguments based on evolutionary theory as a reincarnation of the societal myth Foucault discusses, then the paradigm emphasizing use over pleasure is irrelevant, based simply on a myth of my society. According to this argument, the division between art and entertainment as based on a valued division between use and pleasure is invalidated even further. The conclusion to the original

question, however, remains the same: a division between art and entertainment as based on a valuation of use in opposition to the devalued pleasure is neither valid nor helpful.

The question which underlies this division proves even more difficult to answer. Any division between pieces that is based on a certain kind of reading experience rests on the assumption that reading experience comes from some quality that lies within the piece itself, rather than within the reader. Most writers, however, do not consciously engage with this question, despite the implied answer underlying a good deal of work on the subject. Barthes does tackle this question, albeit implicitly, throughout his career, first in “Authors and Writers” (1972), then in *S/Z* (1973), and finally in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Initially arguing that the difference in reading experience comes from the piece itself--which he divides into two categories, “texts” and “works”--Barthes begins to move toward an argument in *Pleasure* that the approach of the reader, rather than a quality latent in the text, might be responsible for differences in reading experience. He does not, however, clearly claim that one or the other is true, an ambiguity that prevents his work from postulating a clear answer to this question.

“A Case Study,” my third section, will take these theoretical arguments and apply them to the debate over Steig Larsson’s *Millenium*trilogy, largely focusing on the first book, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005). Since the books’ release, critics have debated their status as art, for the most part implicitly framing their discussion around the questions I shall be discussing in my first chapter. The debate around this relatively recent work have varied widely, from claims that the novel cannot be art because of its extreme focus on one specific message--raising awareness of violence against women in modern society--to critiques of Larsson’s writing style and characterization, which, for some, also might

preclude its classification as art. Those that argue for its value as art, however, point to Larsson's skilled plot development, complex understanding of modern issues, and creation of unique and fascinating characters. Still others use the text as a cultural artefact, examining it through a lens of queer theory,³⁸ feminist theory,³⁹ or education theory,⁴⁰ to name but a few. Given its highly contested nature and the visibility of the debate around its qualification as literature--or not--*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* provides a key case study through which the implications of my reading of Barthes' work can be worked out.

In his essay, "'This Isn't Some Damned Locked-Room Mystery Novel': Is *The Millenium Trilogy* Popular Fiction or Literature?," Tyler Shores frames this debate explicitly, first briefly exploring his conceptualization of the divide between what he terms "popular fiction" and "literature"⁴¹--which he is sure exists--before arguing that *The Millenium Trilogy*, including *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, might be qualified as literature. He writes, "there's an important connection between the kinds of books we read and the kinds

³⁸Kim Surkan, "The Girl Who Turned the Tables: A Queer Reading of Lisbeth Salander," *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything Is Fire*, By Eric Bronson, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012: 33-46.

³⁹Andrew Terjesen and Jenny Terjesen, "Why Are So Many Women F***ing Kalle Blomkvist?: Larsson's Philosophy of Female Attraction," *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything Is Fire*, By Eric Bronson, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012: 49-64.

⁴⁰Chad W. Timm, "The Mis-Education of Lisbeth Salander and the Alchemy of the At-Risk Child," *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything Is Fire*, By Eric Bronson, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012: 19-32.

⁴¹Each theorist adds unique terms to the mix, complicating discussion around this topic--Shores opposes "literature" with "popular fiction," the Romantics divide reading experience into "beauty" and the "sublime," and Dant more broadly refers to "art" and "entertainment" (including subtypes of creative writing in both categories). I am treating this set of dichotomies in an admittedly simplified manner, arguing that they fall into the same two general camps. I do not, by any means, believe that they are all entirely equivalent as they are used in their original works; they do, however, all divide works of cultural creation, and creative writing more specifically, into two categories, one of which is valued over the other. I will discuss terms further at the beginning of the following chapter.

of reading we do,"⁴² seemingly addressing the same concern as Barthes: that there might be different types of books, and that there certainly are different categories of reading experiences. Shores claims: "given the serial nature of popular fiction, its readers might be said to read horizontally, eager to get to the end."⁴³ What Shores terms "reading horizontally," while a phrase Barthes might object to, seems to encompass the same type of reading as Barthes' pleasure: a plot-driven one. And, for Shores at least, this approach to reading results from the episodic nature of certain texts, which he dismisses as "popular fiction."

Shores also seems to describe a phenomenon similar to Barthes' bliss: "Readers of literature [as opposed to readers of 'popular fiction'] tend to read vertically, reading slowly for depth of meaning."⁴⁴ This might not be quite as sophisticated as Barthes depiction of bliss, and it certainly uses the ideas of "vertical reading" and "depth" in ways Barthes most likely would not approve of. It does seem, however, to be an attempt at describing an opposite reading pattern to the plot-driven one, just as Barthes opposes pleasure with bliss. Here once again, this type of reading is assigned to a certain category of text, "literature." For Shores, the two types of reading Barthes describes clearly map on to two different types of texts, popular fiction and literature, and the former is unquestionably of lower value than the latter. The majority of Shores' essay, however, is not a theoretical discussion but an argument for *The Millennium Trilogy* as a work of literature, or at the very least as a

⁴²Shores: 107-119.

⁴³ Shores: 110.

⁴⁴Shores: 110.

work of popular fiction that in some ways might work as literature.⁴⁵

This essay, along with several others throughout *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything is Fire* underscore the value of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* to my project--it, more than almost any other recent novel, has sparked debates about the nature of literature, our division between art and entertainment, and the ways in which (perhaps even the reasons why) we read. Ultimately I will use these debates as an illustrative tool for the theoretical claims of my first chapter, highlighting the focus on classifying the books as either art or entertainment and the ways in which these arguments are centered around the two questions I suggest earlier.

⁴⁵ In his essay, Shores never clarifies exactly what he means by a work of popular fiction that functions like literature, or explains how that is a distinction separate from either simply popular fiction or literature.

2. Critical Frameworks

Terms

Let me take a moment at the outset to discuss terms: my task is difficult, since Barthes' French terms so central to my work, all of which have very specific meanings in French, have been translated to English as "text," "work," "author," and "writer," common terms in literary criticism. In an attempt to avoid confusion, I shall then use the terms "piece" and "creator" for the general categories that might typically be indicated by one of those first four words. These words encompass both sets of oppositional terms from Barthes: "piece" includes both the specific subtypes of "text" and "work," while "creator" includes both "writer" and "author." I do this in order to restore specificity to Barthes' terms: whenever I use one of these four terms, I do so using the specific meaning Barthes assigned to them in either "Authors and Writers" or in *S/Z*.¹

As for "bliss" and "pleasure," it is difficult to clarify which meaning of "pleasure" I intend: "pleasure" the overarching category which encompasses both "pleasure" and "bliss," or "pleasure," the subtype within that category. This lack of clarity is, however, perhaps somewhat appropriate; after all, it begins with Barthes' French and, as such, seems somehow necessary to understand the shape his thoughts take throughout *The Pleasure of the Text*. It is however, also one of the few weaknesses I see in Barthes' work--without completely exploring all the implications his terms have, he cannot make his argument clear. Of course, he might have been able to deliberately use the ambiguity of his terms

¹ In a similar vein, I will use "creative writing" rather than "literature" or "popular fiction," both terms Shores uses to describe two specific types of pieces, and "cultural creation" or "artistic activity" to encompass items that might be considered "art" as well as those that have been labelled "entertainment."

fruitfully, but he does not seem to spend enough time discussing and utilizing those ambiguities to do so effectively. I aim to do so, and least partially, at the end of this chapter.

In the first chart below, I have placed the terms into two groups, classified as related to either bliss or pleasure (insofar as these qualities are latent in a creation rather than in a reader's approach to it; Barthes does not necessarily claim one over the other in *The Pleasure of the Text*--I discuss this at greater length further into this chapter). After the relevant terms, I have also included a second chart with general descriptors which Barthes assigned to each of the two categories.

Terms

<u>BLISS</u>	<u>PLEASURE</u>	<u>Used By</u>
"text"	"work"	Barthes
"author (<i>ecrivant</i>)"	"writer (<i>ecrivain</i>)"	Barthes
"art"	"entertainment"	Dant
"literature"	"popular fiction"	Shores
"lisible"	"scriptible"	Barthes
"writerly"	"readerly"	Barthes
"sublime"	"beauty"	Romantics
"critical (or 'close') reading"	"uncritical reading"	Warner
"high art"	"mass art"	Carey

Descriptors/Related Concepts

<u>BLISS</u>	<u>PLEASURE</u>
modern	classic
vertical	horizontal/linear
language	plot
uncomfortable	comfortable
form	content
new ²	familiar
open	closed
infinitely polysemous	limited number of meanings
message	medium

The Implicit Basis for the Division Between “Art” and “Entertainment”

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes argues that pleasure as an end goal has been demonized in Western culture, particularly during the 20th century. He claims that theorists’ political motivation have led them to abandon pleasure as an acceptable central, or even secondary, goal in art. According the work of these critics, Barthes claims that “there is an obscurantism of pleasure...pleasure no longer pleases anyone”;³ “pleasure is

²Barthes does suggest that a claim could be made, though not by him, that repetition can also produce bliss. I discuss this in more detail later in this section, as well as in reference to genre in my third section.

³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Trans. Richard Miller, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1973: 46-47.

either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion.”⁴ In these sections, Barthes argues that according to the dominant ideologies of the day, pleasure for its own end is not, and cannot be, purposeful or helpful. In Barthes’ world, pleasure is rejected on both ends of the political spectrum, as a bourgeois quality by the far left and as a immoral goal by the right.

Michel Foucault spends a good deal more time discussing and complicating Western society’s historical relationship to pleasure *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (1976). He traces the development of a discourse revolving around sex, sexuality, and pleasure through Western history; one of his central themes is that in Western society pleasure is always considered in relation to use. He most explicitly states this when describing a phenomena which he describes as the *ars erotica*, which has historically been the central approach to pleasure and sex in a number of Eastern countries. Of this phenomenon, which he opposes to the ways in which Western society has historically discussed sex, Foucault writes: “truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as an experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by a reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself.”⁵ In this mode of thinking, pleasure can be an acceptable end goal; therefore, use or purpose is not necessarily relevant. Foucault’s description of it lists the ways in which the approach of *ars erotica* does not follow the same patterns as Western thought: “pleasure is *not* considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden [as it is in the Western world], *nor* by reference to a criterion of utility [as in the Western world].” The implication here is that in Western society, by contrast, pleasure *is* considered “in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden” *and* “by reference to a criterion of

⁴ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 57.

⁵ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 57.

utility.” Pleasure for the sake of pleasure does not figure into this paradigm of Western society.

To this claim that pleasure is inexorably linked to both restrictive rules and a focus on use as an objective, Foucault adds another: that in Western society, discourse about pleasure has been forced to voice itself using the truth-oriented discourse of science. Hence “pleasures were called upon to pronounce a discourse of truth concerning themselves, a discourse which had to model itself after that which spoke, not of sin and salvation, but of bodies and life processes--the discourse of science.”⁶ These two claims illustrate that, for Foucault, Western society has subordinated pleasure underneath the twin discourses of utility and science, disallowing pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself. This demonization of pleasure as such has led to the devaluation of pieces which aim solely to provide pleasure for the reader. These pieces, then, tend to be derisively labelled as “entertainment.” Pieces which, on the other hand, serve a *purpose* in the course of society’s or an individual’s development--be it intellectual, social, or emotional--are more highly valued, and are given the label of “art.” Although these pieces can lead to the experience of pleasure by the reader, that is not their central goal; this, for our society, makes them more worthwhile than those pieces grouped into the category of entertainment.⁷

Foucault’s discussion on Western society’s emphasis on use returns me once again

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I. An Introduction*, Trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage, 1990: 64.

⁷ Of course, even theoretically speaking, not all thinkers have agreed that pleasure alone is not somehow useful. Aristotle, for example, referred to catharsis as having “its own pleasure, not just any pleasure...the pleasure springing from pity and fear.” This pleasure, he claimed, served a *purpose* in that it allowed for the release of emotions on the part of the audience and, ideally, changed the audience in some way. This approach, when opposed to the modern approach of Western society described in Foucault, highlights one of the ways in which pleasure and use not need be diametrically opposed, nor one subordinated to the other.

to the recent “use” edition of *New Literary History*. As I discussed in my first section, many of the essays in this edition use evolutionary theory to argue for the usefulness of artistic activity. As Easterlin and Boyd claim, anything so costly to human survival must have contributed, in some way, to our success as a species. By this logic, however, anything derisively labelled “entertainment” by today’s society *must also have been useful to humanity’s development*. Pleasure itself, and the drive for pleasure which seems to be shared among the majority of human beings, is then useful by the same logical pattern as artistic tendencies. If it did not aid our survival in some way--either as individuals or as a community--then it too would have been weeded out over the course of thousands of years of evolution. Thus, if we turn to evolutionary theory, any distinction between art and entertainment as based on a distinction of use or purpose in opposition to pleasure cannot be valid. By this logic, pleasure is useful just as much as the more “desirable” experiences an artistic encounter can provide.

However, I am inclined to believe that these arguments centered around evolutionary theory are another reincarnation of what Barthes once referred to as a “euphoric dream of scientificity,”⁸⁹ and another of the attempts which Foucault discusses to promote the discourse of science above all others. This focus on evolutionary theory seems to be an unhelpful reincarnation of a recurring myth in modern Western society: that we must frame discussions in the discourse of science, and tolerate pleasure only as a

⁸ Roland Barthes, “Réponses,” [interview] *Tel Quel* 47 (Autumn 1971): 97.

⁹ This statement was in reference to his early emphasis on semiology and structuralism. However, I believe it is an ideal phrase to describe the emphasis on scientific discourse which Foucault points to.

byproduct of “greater” utility.¹⁰ Thus, evolutionary theory is perhaps not as helpful as might originally seem to this work; although it would, as discussed previously, eliminate the basis for a use-based distinction between art and entertainment.

Rather than arguing that both art and entertainment are somehow useful, however, I prefer to argue that they need not be, and that the valuation of use over pleasure is simply a reflection of a myth regarding the supremacy of utility in Western society. This point of view cannot be objectively proven as valid--Foucault’s description of the *ars erotica* provides an alternate approach--and therefore cannot be objectively justified as a model by which to value certain experiences over others; use is not inherently more valuable than uselessness or pleasure. Thus a divide between entertainment and art does not seem to be logically valid: how can we devalue that which aims to produce pleasure over that which aims to serve a use if neither is necessarily preferable to the other? Discussion around this division, however, rests on a deeper question, one which is not often explicitly discussed: does the reading experience rely on the piece itself? Or is it, rather, a result of the approach or attitude the reader brings to the piece? This question will be the focus of the following section.

The Source of the Reading Experience

If the reading experience is somehow dependent on some quality latent within the piece itself--or even the approach of the author, as Barthes suggests early on--then it would make sense to attempt to classify pieces based on the quality or type of reading experience,

¹⁰ Of course, I cannot prove that evolutionary theory is no more than this, nor is it the goal of this thesis to do so. It simply seems as such to me after my relatively brief engagement with the subject matter.

as there is something intrinsically different about the pieces themselves. If not, however--if the differences in reading experience are dependent on the reader rather than on the piece itself--this division of pieces as it could be formulated on the basis of reading experience seems illogical. In that case, it would be more productive to use the terms in reference to an approach to reading rather than regarding specific pieces, or even genres, of creative writing.

Barthes traced this question through several pieces he published during the 1970's: "Authors and Writers," *S/Z*, and, finally, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes initially proposes this difference as a distinction based on the writer's approach in "Authors and Writers," then as one based in the text in *S/Z*, before beginning to suggest in *The Pleasure of the Text*, though not ever entirely committed to the idea, that the distinction lies at least partially with the reader's approach. In "Authors and Writers," published in 1972 in *Critical Essays*, Barthes frames this opposition in terms of two different types of creators: the author writes for the end (the message), and the writer for the means (the medium). The author focuses on the content; the writer, on the other hand, first decides how to write before choosing what to write.¹¹ At this stage in Barthes' thought, this distinction within the creator determines the quality of both the piece produced and the reading experience of those who engage with it.

In *S/Z*, published the following year, Barthes further develops a philosophical stance that will only be entirely realized several years later in *The Pleasure of the Text*. He introduces the opposition between "lisible" and "scriptible" pieces in *S/Z*, one which he also frames as the difference between a "work" and a "text." Sturrock claims that this is

¹¹ John Sturrock, *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi Strauss to Derrida*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979: 65-67.

intrinsically tied to the writer/author division suggested in “Authors and Writers”: that “the *ecrivain* [the writer] produces a Text, the *ecrivant* [the author] only a Work.”¹² The text imposes its form on the reader, forcing the reader “to enjoy that spectacle for its own sake rather than to look through language to the world”;¹³ the work, by contrast, allows and encourages the reader look through, or past, language to its world. A work is “readerly”: it is complete and unified before the reader encounters it; there are a finite number of meanings or interpretations that can be ascribed to it or to any of its pieces. The text, on the other hand, is “writerly,” allowing the reader to continuously engage in developing the infinite meanings possible in the piece. To use Barthes’ words, the work is a product bonded by a message and the text a production bondless with possibilities.¹⁴ It is relatively easy to see the connection to the two types of creators Barthes discusses in “Authors and Writers”: the focus of one is on language (form) and the focus of its opposite is content (meaning).

From this claim, the connection between *S/Z* and *Pleasure* is also readily apparent: “*The Pleasure of the Text* does indeed rest on a dual foundation...the opposition between *lisible* and *scriptible*, or *work* and *text*”¹⁵ that had been initially postulated in *S/Z* and partially foreshadowed in “Authors and Writers.” Barthes will eventually complicate the idea that the distinction is creator-based in *The Pleasure of the Text*: if pieces are “read in pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure...Does writing in pleasure guarantee-- guarantee me, the writer, my reader’s pleasure? Not at all.”¹⁶ Although he continues to

¹² Sturrock: 69.

¹³ Sturrock: 60.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Translated by Richard Miller, London: Cape, 1975: 5.

¹⁵ Annette Lavers, *Roland Barthes, Structuralism and After*, London: Methuen, 1982: 196.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 4.

argue that writing a text--a piece that might produce pleasure in its reader--requires pleasure on the part of the writer during its creation (as opposed to the apparently pleasure-less author), it is not sufficient to guarantee the reader's pleasure. In fact, Barthes describes the production of pleasure as a betting game,¹⁷ one which the author cannot control. In this book, Barthes has left the centrality of the author and the writer behind and begins to move to focus on the reader's role in the production of pleasure.

Throughout *The Pleasure of the Text*, it is important to note that Barthes uses the terms bliss and pleasure to describe both pieces and the reading experience; that is to say, he does not clarify whether this is something latent within the pieces themselves, or rather if this is a way of reading which can be applied to any piece. He seems loathe to abandon the piece-based argument he had developed years earlier in *S/Z*, but he does, however, suggest that even classical (plot or character centered) pieces might be read with bliss, shifting the emphasis away from the piece itself and to the reader's approach to it. Barthes seems stuck between the two oppositional approaches, and as such does not align with either Shores, who claims that reading experience is dependent on the the text itself, or with Carey, who argues instead that art, including creative writing, can be defined as such only by the individual's reaction--in the case of creative writing, by the reading experience.

For example, Barthes writes early on in *Pleasure* that what he enjoys most in a piece are "the abrasions I impose upon its fine surface."¹⁸ The surface of the piece itself is not the source of his pleasure; rather, he suggests that pleasure springs from his own approach, the marks he leaves on the otherwise featureless piece. Later, however, he provides distinctions between pleasure and bliss that seem more based in the nature of a piece

¹⁷ Barthes, *Pleasure*.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 11-12.

instead, claiming, for instance, that “the New is bliss.”¹⁹ This is a claim that seems to tie bliss to a specific type of piece--that which is new--rather than to a reading approach. This piece-based argument seems entirely different from the focus on a reader’s abrasions on the “fine surface” of a piece.

I do not, however, believe this ambiguity between the two categories necessarily need be fruitless. Rather, I argue that which Barthes seems to imply: certain texts might be more likely to create one reading experience or another within the reader, but ultimately the reader’s approach is the deciding factor as to the nature of the reading experience. To use the quotes above as examples: the two claims in conjunction need not necessarily be contradictory. Perhaps those pieces that are “New” simply provide a surface which is easier to abrade than the familiar, thereby making them more amenable to the production of bliss. After all, any familiar piece is also associated with certain ways of reading, with a critical cannon, and with a historical context and tradition. The new, however, is not; this fact might therefore encourage a more independent reading experience.

As Lavers summarizes her understanding of Barthes’ work in *S/Z*: “the *scriptible* text...is not an object as such (although some texts contain more *scriptible* than others).”²⁰ This conclusion, then, complicates any distinction regarding a division of pieces into art and entertainment, as these two categories have been established because of a perceived difference in reading experience. The reader has a great deal of agency in the production of any given reading experience; given that claim, any division of pieces on that basis seems, at best, somewhat arbitrary.

Further support for this approach can be found in Michael Warner’s 2004 piece,

¹⁹ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 41.

²⁰ Lavers: 202.

“Uncritical Reading.” In this article, Warner examines the academic insistence on the reading approach labelled “critical reading,” pointing to the difficulty of defining this frequently used term. He claims the turn to focus on this type of reading in the 20th century was a reaction to a societal pressure to prove literary studies to be “useful” for students in some way, claiming that “the normative program of critical reading has allowed literature departments to sell themselves as providing a basic element of education, despite a widely felt disenchantment with the idea of literature, which students in a technologically changing climate increasingly encounter as archaic.”²¹ To Warner, then, this specific reading approach is tied to the same sort of societal emphasis on use as an end goal that Foucault discusses decades earlier, one that is only growing with technological advances and an emphasis on science-based fields of study.

More relevant to this section of my thesis, however, is the section of Warner’s work which deals with a reading practice he labels “uncritical reading.” Here he uses two early modern approaches to reading scripture as examples of the opposition between critical and uncritical reading. Although the two approaches dealt with the same piece--the Bible--the resulting reading experience differed dramatically. The first method, critical reading, is actually a more recent reading approach than the other according to Warner. In this method, the goal is to read by paying special attention to the piece as a whole, rather than to individual parts independently. In doing so, the reader strives to understand how certain passages relate to others and to the entirety of the piece. When applied to the Bible in the early modern era, this led to a strikingly academic and intellectual reading experience. The uncritical approach, one focused on chance readings of certain verses followed by

²¹ Michael Warner, “Uncritical Reading,” *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*. Ed. Jane Gallop, New York: Routledge, 2004: 14.

reflection on them, does not seem to evoke the same sort of unifying, scholarly thinking on the part of the reader. Rather, the response to this approach is an emotional and spiritual one--according to Warner's work, the same piece (the Bible) can produce drastically different reading experiences when approached in different ways. He suggests this pattern might hold true when, for example, students read a piece in their own time as opposed to reading it for a class--the difference lies in whether the student approaches the piece with critical or uncritical methods.

This claim supports my own: that although some pieces might be more prone to create certain types of reading experience, it is the reader's approach, not the piece itself, that ultimately serves as the deciding factor. Thus, attempts to sort pieces based on the experience they incur in readers is, I think, less valuable than focusing attention on the ways in which we read. Warner has certainly begun to do so in his distinction between critical and uncritical reading. His work could be carried further, however, by turning attention to the different possible ways of approaching a text and the implications those approaches have on the type of reading experience. Perhaps the pleasure of the reader does not spring from the piece itself, but rather from the attitude and approach the reader chooses to apply to the piece in that moment, whether consciously or not.

3. A Case Study

Why Larsson?

Thus far, my discussion of the art/entertainment divide has been wholly theoretical, focusing on the ways in which we might think about different reading approaches and their relationships to the pieces we read. Now, in my turn to a specific text as a case-study, I have chosen to focus on Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2004), the first of the highly acclaimed *Millennium Trilogy*. This book is, in many ways, a perfect choice for this topic: it has been incredibly successful both in its country of origin, Sweden, and around the world. It has been made into a movie--twice--and topped best-seller lists. It has also, however, been subject to severe criticism from many sides, resulting in an ongoing debate about its place in the traditional dualistic paradigm for texts: is it high art (literature)? or is it merely amusement (popular fiction)? The novel's inability to fit inside either of the neatly defined categories serves to problematize this divide: it is an example of a piece that resists either definition, thriving in the ambiguous territory between the two polar opposites of this discourse.

In many ways, *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* is an acutely self-aware text. It has been criticized as a largely predictable murder-mystery novel that neatly follows the conventions of its genre, with a classic mystery set-up and a typical detective-like character as a protagonist, complete with helpful sidekick. In reality, however, Larsson both utilizes and undermines the expectations of genre, calling attention to the extent to which *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* works both within and beyond genre stereotypes of murder-mystery novels. In addition, Larsson uses his novel as a platform for his discussion of

feminist issues, which many critics have dismissed as too heavy-handed and obvious, but also the more complicated and nuanced concepts such as morality, the role of the individual in society, and the power of language.

Boredom

Larsson's critics have attacked him on the basis of the novel's formulaic nature, arguing that his novel is merely following the accepted conventions of the genre. Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times, for example, remarks that Larsson writes by "resorting to every bad cliché from every bad serial-killer movie ever shown on late night TV."¹ This criticism reflects the valuation of the new over the familiar central to Barthes' discussion of bliss vs. pleasure in *The Pleasure of the Text*. Throughout the novel, however, Larsson acknowledges the adherence to genre that initially seems so apparent. He even goes so far as to directly mention in the piece the specific sub-genre to which *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* belongs, namely novels known as locked-room mysteries. This is a type of mystery that was popularized by Agatha Christie in which the crime (usually a murder) is committed in an enclosed area which cannot be entered or left.² As a result, the suspect list consists of only those individuals who were trapped in the area the crime was committed, and everyone who was in the area is automatically a suspect.

When the main character, Mikael Blomkvist, first learns of the mystery he will be attempting to solve, it is described to him in precisely those terms. The crime, a presumed murder of the then-sixteen Harriet Vanger, occurs on an island with only one bridge

¹ Michiko Kakutani, (29 September 2008), "If Nick and Nora Lived in a Darker Landscape," *The New York Times*, Retrieved 2013-11-06.

² Kakutani.

connecting it to the mainland--a bridge that is conveniently cut off by an accident the very day that Harriet disappears. Her elderly grandfather describes how “the bridge was blocked for twenty-four hours...during those twenty-four hours Hedeby Island was to all intents and purposes cut off from the rest of the world”;³ he continues to explain the additional inaccessibility of any boats during this time and the impossibility of swimming across the channel. To anyone familiar with murder-mysteries, this is clearly recognizable as a classic setup for a locked-room puzzle.⁴ Larsson, however, immediately acknowledges this use of stereotype: in responding to the explanation of the crime, Blomkvist notes that it is “a sort of locked-room mystery in an island format,”⁵ choosing the same language typically used to define the genre. This statement, then, marks an unusual departure from the established rules of genre, as a murder-mystery novel would not normally declare itself as one in such clear terms.

Larsson goes even further at the end of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, as Blomkvist exclaims to another character, “this isn’t some damned locked-room mystery novel!”⁶ This statement is startling because, of course, that is precisely what has been presented to us for the last 500 pages. To the attentive reader, the denial of genre expectations here ties back to the original identification of the book as a locked-room mystery, emphasizing Larsson’s awareness of the novel’s ties to this genre as well as its deviations from it. As Shores writes, “Larsson has provided clues for us to think about his

³ Stieg Larsson, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Trans. Reg Keelend, New York, NY: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 2011: 103.

⁴ Kakutani.

⁵ Larsson: 104.

⁶ Larsson: 547.

novels as more than merely crime fiction.”⁷ Of course, it is important to remember that Shores’ phrase “merely crime fiction” reflects the value-based judgments of certain genres that are received as causing “merely” pleasure. Shores’ insistence that *Girl* should be classified as “literature” rather than as “popular fiction” points to the underlying paradigm dividing pieces into two categories on the basis of their ability to produce either use or pleasure in readers. Shores, in defending *Girl’s* value, begins to insist that although it might initially seem “merely” pleasurable or amusing, the novel and the trilogy as a whole have some greater purpose, the ability to emotionally and intellectually affect and engage their audience.

It is also worthwhile to note that, despite allegations to the contrary, the *Millenium* trilogy does noticeably deviate from its genre conventions. The case Blomkvist was originally hired to solve, the murder of Harriet Vanger, turns out not to have been a murder at all. His exploration, however, does lead him to a discovery of two Vanger family members’ cruel rape and murder of a series of women, stretching from 1949 to the present, in addition to Harriet’s rape by the two men involved--her father and brother--and her subsequent flight to Australia. The seemingly classic locked-island mystery setup, then, becomes anything but. In fact, Larsson uses conventions from a wide range of subgenres, including Swedish children’s literature such as *Pippi Longstocking*, American serial killer narratives, and feminist crime narratives from the 1980’s and 90’s.⁸ Larsson’s clever use of the language of the literary genre by his characters highlights this mixture of and deviation

⁷ Shores: 108.

⁸ Barbara Fister, "The Millenium Trilogy and the American Serial Killer Narrative: Investigating Protagonists of Men Who Write Women," *Rape in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*, Ed. Berit Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horeck, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013: 38-40.

from genre expectations.

So maybe the text is not quite as formulaic as originally thought but, even if it was, would that matter? Maybe not. As Carey points out, much of what he refers to as “mass art” is admittedly quite formulaic, but so is so-called “high art.” The only difference in that respect seems to be the type of formula followed, not the fact that there is one.⁹

Additionally, Barthes suggests that sometimes it is those works that most closely adhere to genre that are able to produce bliss, or that most easily allow the production of bliss, in, or by, the reader. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, he explains the appeal of traditional Greek tragedies in which, although you might not be able to predict the details of the ending precisely, you can always predict the general ending to the narrative (in other words: they are predictable, just as critics claim *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is). He writes about experiencing bliss through “a story *whose end I know: know and I don’t know.*”¹⁰ This idea can relatively easily be applied to genre novels such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*: those areas in the text that are predictable might in and of themselves be a locus for bliss within the text, not a point of critique.

As mentioned briefly in the second part of this thesis, “Theoretical Frameworks,” Barthes noted in *Pleasure* that an argument might be made, though not by him, that repetition can produce bliss. Repetitious language, for example, can force attention to the medium of language itself rather than to the message contained within the language, which is a hallmark of the reading practice of bliss that Barthes espouses.¹¹ Alternatively, repetition of message might encourage the same sort of turn: if the outcome of the story is

⁹ Carey: 44-47.

¹⁰ Barthes, *Pleasure*: 47.

¹¹ This technique is commonly used in poetry, as well as in experimental Modern prose such as the work of Gertrude Stein.

already, at least to some degree, one the reader can predict, then discovering it will no longer be the primary goal of reading. As a result, the reader might then pay closer attention to *how* the story reaches its ending rather than to *what* the ending is. Any piece that conforms to the stereotypical content of a genre, then, could be seen as encouraging bliss by decreasing the incentive for the reader to focus primarily on the content rather than on the form. Thus, although the critics are not entirely right about Larsson's strict adherence to genre, the moments in which he does follow genre conventions could be read as moments of bliss rather than as instances of a lack of creativity or talent.

Perhaps the difference between these two possible experiences lies not within the piece itself, but rather within the approaches of the reader who criticizes such repetition. According to Lavers, *S/Z* acknowledges that some readers--whom Barthes thinks of as "lazy reader[s]"--might not put enough energy into a text to produce a certain reading experience. Lavers claims that the implication in *S/Z* is that only a certain type of reading approach "can save [the reader] from monotony and the text from banality";¹² years later, Barthes explicitly makes this claim in *Pleasure*: "boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss as seen from the shores of pleasure."¹³ In other words, those who aim only to read for pleasure do not deeply involve themselves in the play of language that can produce bliss and, as a result, view that energy-intensive practice as a boring and needlessly time-consuming one. Barthes claims this is the reason that some prefer classic pieces to modern ones; if the reader is looking only to understand content, the focus on language in modernism might seem frustrating (boring) rather than blissful.

This claim that a difference in reading approach produces boredom rather than bliss,

¹² Lavers: 187-8.

¹³ Barthes, *Pleasure*, 26.

at least in some cases, highlights my argument that a reading approach can drastically affect the reading experience to be gained from any given piece. I do not wish to imply that those who criticize *Girl* for its predictability are necessarily “lazy,” or even that I support Barthes and Lavers’ valuation of a certain approach to reading over another. I am simply using this argument to illustrate that reading approach, rather than the piece itself, might be the root cause for boredom or displeasure while reading. In any case, the feeling of boredom while reading cannot necessarily be blamed on the quality or the nature of the piece itself, especially since not every reader will or can have the same experience.

Message

The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo is not, however, most criticized as a predictable locked-room mystery novel, but rather as a politically feminist text defending women’s rights and highlighting the issue of violence against women in Sweden. And, undoubtedly, the novel does do this, often in a heavy-handed and seemingly excessive manner, as a number of critics have scathingly discussed. The idea seems to be that, as Barthes himself once commented, “there is no great work which is ‘dogmatic.’”¹⁴ The original title in Swedish, literally translated, is *Men Who Hate Women*--clearly a reference to the issue of sexism.¹⁵ Alex Berenson, a book reviewer for the *New York Times*, caustically refers to this

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, “What is Criticism?” 1963.

¹⁵ The change in translation was not, as it turns out, due to artistic considerations of any kind. Rather the title *Men Who Hate Women* was rejected by publishers in the UK and the US because it was “too confrontational” (Weida 129), and, since Larsson had passed away by the time of translation, he was not able to comment. They felt that *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* would be less likely to antagonize possible readers.

title as as “a label that just about captures the subtlety of the novel's sexual politics.”¹⁶ Larsson goes even further, having Salander, one of the lead female characters, refer to a central antagonist as “one more man who hates women.”¹⁷ Even with the title changed in the English translation, the use of this phrase here feels forced--we are jarringly thrown from the world of the novel into the world of Larsson, feminist writer and advocate for abused women. With the original title in place, it would have been an even more obvious nod to the issues at hand.

This emphasis on the rejection of dogma in artistic creations here seems to contradict the suggestion that one central dividing factor between the socially constructed categories of art and entertainment is that of purpose versus pleasure. After all, Larsson’s critics focus on the ways in which he *uses* the artistic medium in order to convey a political message as evidence that the novels do not deserve to be categorized as art, not the other way around. I do not believe, however, that this fact necessarily undermines my claim. Rather, it seems to me that these attacks have two underlying reasons: first, that Larsson seems, at some points, to dictate to the reader exactly what purpose his novels can be used for, thereby limiting their use for other reasons, and second, that this political goal seems to be marginalize or diminish what critics might see as the “proper” uses for art.

Larsson, from the outset, is very clear that his novels have a singular, political, motive. During Blomkvist’s investigation of the mystery, for example, he needs to request archived photographs from a local newspaper. Larsson makes a point to note, “the pictures editor...was Madeleine Blomberg, called Maja. She was the first woman pictures editor

¹⁶ Alex Berenson, (11 September 2008), “Stieg Larsson's *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*,” *The New York Times*, Retrieved 2013-11-06.

¹⁷ Larsson: 595.

Blomkvist had met in journalism, where photography was still primarily a male art form.”¹⁸ Maja’s sex is not referenced again; in fact, after the conclusion of this short scene, Maja does not make another appearance for the remainder of the novel. Neither do pictures editors or photography, at least in anything other than a very minor role. This moment, then, only serves to underscore Larsson’s already clear focus on feminism, and works with other instances (such as the nod to the Swedish title) to create an overbearing sense of a novel designed to beat a message home in its readers.

The novel is divided into books, and Larsson begins these with epigraphs, each of which is statistic about violence against women in modern Sweden. The four statistics given are “eighteen percent of women in Sweden have at one time been threatened by a man,”¹⁹ “forty six percent of the women in Sweden have been subjected to violence by a man,”²⁰ “thirteen percent of the women in Sweden have been subjected to aggravated sexual assault outside a sexual relationship,”²¹ and “ninety two percent of women in Sweden who have been subjected to sexual assault have not reported the incident to the police.”²² This tactic initially seems to be yet another way for Larsson to drive home his message, which, of course, is one important part of their role. In addition, however, the epigraphs also serve to increase Larsson’s believability and to underscore that his seemingly farfetched story might be plausible after all; that, in other words, his fiction crosses into factual territory.²³

¹⁸ Larsson: 329.

¹⁹ Larsson: 9.

²⁰ Larsson: 139.

²¹ Larsson: 299.

²² Larsson: 485.

²³ In fact, this seems to be yet another reflection of Foucault’s claim: Larsson frames his work of art in terms of the absolute, quantitative discourse of scientific inquiry.

Throughout the novel, Larsson seems concerned that his readers might refuse to accept that so many women could plausibly be tortured and killed by Gottfried and Martin Vanger, that Harriet Vanger would murder her father and run away rather than going to the police, and/or that Lisbeth Salander would similarly rely on extra-legal measures to obtain revenge against the man who rapes her. These epigraphs, although not cited and therefore questionable to an academic audience, provide a mechanism through which Larsson can argue that this sort of situation can, and does, happen. He further defends the plausibility through a conversation between Blomkvist and Salander:

‘The idea that an insanely sick sadistic serial killer was slaughtering women for at least seventeen years without anyone seeing a connection sounds utterly unbelievable to me.’ [said Blomkvist]...

‘No, it’s not so unbelievable,’ [Salander] said, holding up one finger. ‘We have several dozen unsolved murders of women in Sweden during the twentieth century. That professor of criminology, Persson, said once on TV that serial killers are very rare in Sweden, but that probably we have had some that were never caught.’²⁴

Salander continues to lay out other factors that contribute to the plausibility of their theory (which of course turns out to be true), including the time and distance dividing the string of crimes and the lack of an immediately obvious pattern connecting them. Here, Larsson furthers the claim of believability initiated in his epigraphs, using his characters to bring up and promptly debunk a possible criticism of his work.

Queer theorist Kim Surkan further complicates critic’s claim of simple, obvious, “gender politics” within the novel. Lisbeth Salander, she claims, is not a simple feminist

²⁴ Larsson: 414.

character, but rather one who espouses some feminist values while simultaneously remaining stubbornly apolitical and defying stereotypes of feminists.²⁵ She cites as examples Salander's willingness to adopt a heteronormative appearance, despite her usual refusal, on an as-needed basis²⁶ and her choice to undergo breast augmentation surgery in the sequel to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*.²⁷ Although Larsson undoubtedly presents a politically feminist text, he does not present a typically feminist character. As Surkan notes, Salander is "a character with feminist values who resists a feminism based on...political beliefs."²⁸ The series is overtly political; its central feminist character, however, is adamantly not.

Larsson continues to bring up issues affecting women in a number of arenas. He specifically mentions eating disorders several times, for example, but only to emphasize that his super-skinny female protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, does not have one. When Salander is first introduced, she is described as "a pale, anorexic young woman,"²⁹ but Larsson takes care to clarify only a paragraph later: "she did not in fact have an eating disorder...on the contrary, she seemed to consume every kind of junk food. She had simply been born thin."³⁰ It would have been easy enough to describe Salander as "thin" rather than "anorexic" from the get-go, saving Larsson the later explanation. This mention of an eating disorder, then, works as a nod to an important women's issue in Sweden and around the world and does so much less invasively than many other similar moments.

²⁵ Surkan: 36.

²⁶ She adopts alternative identities ("Monica Sholes" and "Irene Nesser"), both very traditional "female" characters, in order to steal an antagonist's money. See Larsson: 612-614.

²⁷ Surkan: 39-41.

²⁸ Surkan: 36.

²⁹ Larsson: 41.

³⁰ Larsson: 41.

Underscoring this focus on an eating disorder, Larsson brings it up again as Blomkvist addresses Salander, “at least I’ve found out that you’re not vegetarian or--as Herr Frode thought--anorexic,”³¹ and a third time, describing her as “an anorexically thin girl.”³² Of course, this might simply be a device to imply that Salander does have some sort of eating disorder--bulimia, for example--but, if so, it seems like an odd way to point to that fact, especially since it does not otherwise play a role in Salander’s developing characterization. And regardless of whether it was designed to comment on Salander’s eating habits, the focus on anorexia more generally brings to the fore an important women’s issue.

To many readers, this heavy-handed focus on feminist issues throughout the novels might seem to prevent Larsson’s work from serving any other purpose or from being used in any other way. For Berenson, for example, the problem is not that the novels have a political message, but rather that it is not framed subtly enough for him to ignore it or to choose a different purpose for the piece. Just as Barthes favored pieces with an infinite number of possible meanings, interpretations, or uses,³³ Berenson dislikes the *Millenium* trilogy because it seems to dictate a singular point rather than allowing the reader to use the text in any of a number of different ways.

The trilogy, however, does show a more discreet attention to feminism at points; in the way it refers to characters almost exclusively by last name, for example. Outside of dialogue, the vast majority of characters, both male and female, are referred to in this way; Blomkvist, Salander, Berger, Beckman, and Frode are just a few examples of this pervasive trend. The most frequent exceptions to this rule are characters who share last names with

³¹ Larsson: 361.

³² Larsson: 600.

³³ Barthes, *S/Z*: 10, 77, 93.

previously introduced characters, such as Blomkvist's daughter Pernilla and the entire Vanger family, which is quite large. In these cases, both males and females can be referenced to using their first name, as can minor characters such as the previously mentioned Maja. These cases, however, are the exception rather than the rule, a noticeable choice. By favoring names such as Blomkvist and Berger over than the highly gendered Mikael and Erika, for example, Larsson largely removes the immediate association of gender with a character every time he or she is mentioned. The reader knows, of course, the gender of each character, but Larsson eliminates the assumption that this is an important, if not the single most important, factor in identifying a character. He redirects the focus from gender toward action and speech through a formal choice by refusing to use gendered first names.

Blomkvist's sex life also serves as a site for a positive feminist message within the piece, subtly providing a counterpoint to the overwhelming sexism so pervasive throughout the novel's plot. As Berenson notes, "except for Blomkvist, nearly every man in the book under age 70 is a violent misogynist."³⁴ Although this is an exaggeration--Larsson introduces a variety of characters, many of whom are non-misogynistic males--Blomkvist is the only male character who respects women while having an actively described sex life. And not only does his sex life differ dramatically from all of the other men in the book, Terjesen and Terjesen point out that it differs equally from our stereotypical expectations of men's behavior in sexual relationships more generally.³⁵ Blomkvist has three lovers over the course of the novel: Erika Berger, his long-time friend and business partner; and Cecilia Vanger, a relative of both the criminals (Gottfried and Martin) and the victim (Harriet) in

³⁴ Berenson.

³⁵ Terjesen and Terjesen: 56-59.

the crime Blomkvist has been hired to investigate; and Lisbeth Salander, a much younger and apparently troubled co-investigator on the island.

Each woman seems to control the course the relationship will take both emotionally and sexually. Berger and Blomkvist have had a long-standing affair, and it continues despite her marriage to another man (who knows about Blomkvist). In this rather untraditional relationship, Berger splits her time between the two men, and she decides when she will sleep with Blomkvist and when she will sleep with Gregor Beckman, her husband. When we meet Berger and she accompanies Blomkvist home for the first time, she informs him, "I've already told Gregor I'll be at your place tonight."³⁶ Although Larsson makes it clear that Berger values both the men in her life, and that she respects their wishes and emotions, she is clearly in control of both relationships. Further emphasizing Berger's role of power here, she initiates every sexual encounter she has with Blomkvist over the course of the novel.

Similarly, Cecilia Vanger initiates the beginning of her sexual relationship with Blomkvist. At her invitation, Blomkvist stops by her house one night. The two are talking, and Cecilia makes the first sexual reference in the conversation--"I could use an occasional lover myself"³⁷--as well as initiating physical contact with Blomkvist: "she kicked off her slippers and propped one foot on his knee."³⁸ In every stage of physical progression from that point on, it is Cecilia, not Blomkvist, who initiates and controls the contact. Their relationship does escalate and decrease rapidly from that moment on, but Cecilia is consistently the one who guides the increase in time spent together as well as the one who

³⁶ Larsson: 67.

³⁷ Larsson: 240.

³⁸ Larsson: 240.

cuts the relationship off.

Lisbeth Salander, the last of Blomkvist's lovers over the course of the novel, seems the most likely of the three to be dominated by him in some way. She is almost twenty years his junior, after all, did not formally finish high school, and has been declared legally incompetent and mentally unstable by the state of Sweden. Surprisingly enough, however, she establishes a relationship with Blomkvist that is strikingly similar to his earlier relationships with both Berger and Cecilia. When their relationship turns sexual, it is as a result of Salander going into Blomkvist's bedroom in the middle of the night, wearing only a sheet. Larsson writes, "she went over to his bed, took his book, and put it on the bedside table. Then she bent down and kissed him on the mouth. She quickly got into bed and sat looking at him."³⁹ Although she stops long enough for Blomkvist to assent to this sudden change in the relationship, the entire encounter is driven by Salander.

Later in the novel the power dynamic between the two is touched on once again, as Salander informs Blomkvist, "now I'm going to take a shower, and then I think I'll get into your bed naked. If you think you're too old, you'll have to go sleep on the camp bed."⁴⁰ This moment is highly reminiscent of Blomkvist's conversations with Berger early on in the novel, in which she invites herself into his bed and he simply accepts her presence there. With all three of his lovers, Blomkvist seems to be the passive participant, allowing the female to utilize a great deal of agency in dictating the progression of their relationship.

Of course, this reading of Salander's relationship with Blomkvist might initially seem to be undermined by the novel's somewhat strange ending, in which Salander's hopes for love with Blomkvist are dashed by his continuing relationship with Berger. After the case

³⁹ Larsson: 434.

⁴⁰ Larsson: 553.

has been successfully solved and the necessary parties punished for their wrong-doing, Salander realizes she has developed true feelings for Blomkvist: “she wanted to hear him say that he liked her for who she was. That she was someone special in his world and in his life. She wanted him to give her some gesture of love, not just of friendship and companionship.”⁴¹ This sort of heightened emotional attachment is entirely atypical of Salander, and Larsson informs us that “she had never in her life felt such a longing.”⁴² Given this buildup of emotional tone, the reader expects a romantic fulfillment of Salander’s fantasies regarding her relationship with Blomkvist.

This, surprisingly enough, is not the road Larsson takes. When Salander heads over to Blomkvist’s apartment to give him his Christmas present, a metal sign of Elvis, she sees him walking with Berger, clearly as a couple. Her reaction is visceral and uncontrollable: “the pain was so immediate and fierce that Lisbeth⁴³ stopped in mid-stride, incapable of movement...she turned on her heel and went home to her newly spotless apartment. As she passed Zinkensdamm it started to snow. She tossed Elvis into a dumpster.”⁴⁴ That is the last passage of the novel, hardly the happy ending one might expect from a more traditional murder-mystery type novel--yes, the central criminals do end up being discovered and punished. But not all of the negatively portrayed characters do, and the protagonists certainly do not all end up living “happily ever after.” This might be a genre novel, but that

⁴¹ Larsson: 642.

⁴² Larsson: 642.

⁴³ This is one of the few times Larsson refers to her as “Lisbeth” rather than “Salander,” and this choice serves to draw the reader’s attention to her heightened emotional vulnerability in this moment.

⁴⁴ Larsson: 643-644.

does not prevent it from being realistic, at times almost excruciatingly so.⁴⁵

Although this ending does undoubtedly undermine critics' claims of Larsson's blind conformity to genre expectations, it does not diminish the role of the power dynamics between Blomkvist and his women as it might initially seem to. Salander does admittedly lose the control of this relationship that she had previously enjoyed; for once, she is not the one setting the terms. As it turns out, however, this is not because of Blomkvist himself but rather because of his relationship with another woman, Berger. It is not an moment in which Blomkvist asserts his power over his relationship with a woman, but simply one in which one woman's agency overcomes another woman's. Terjesen and Terjesen argue that although Blomkvist has trouble committing to most of his lovers--a trait stereotypically associated with male sexual behavior--it is only as a result of his relationship with Berger.⁴⁶ As a result it upholds, not compromises, Blomkvist's love-life as a site for female empowerment and agency.

That being said, many critics nevertheless reject these moments of feminism, in which the political message could easily be ignored, as harshly as the more overt political moments within the novel. Thus, critiques of Larsson's politicism cannot solely be based on the inability of the reader to dictate his own use or purpose for the piece. Also implicit in this rejection is not only the remaining focus on the *use* of a piece, but some sort of a limitation regarding the type of use that is "appropriate" for art. I believe that Berenson, among others, objects to the political focus in the novels not just because of its restrictive nature but also because it is not a purpose that he accepts as a possible use for "high art."

⁴⁵ Of course, this novel is the first of three in the series, so this moment is not truly the end for these characters. The conclusion of the third book, however, is similarly realistic: Salander and Blomkvist do become cordial acquaintances, but neither has a traditional romantic ending.

⁴⁶ Terjesen and Terjesen: 59-61.

This is another implication of the OED definitions previously discussed in “The Debate”: “art” is that which is appreciated for its beauty or emotional impact; it is not intended to amuse, like “entertainment,” but neither does it have an unlimited number of uses.

After all, it is extremely rare for someone to complain that a piece of art cannot be used for a political purpose (though, to be fair, this complaint was far more common in the previous century during the heyday of Marxist influence), despite the great number of complaints around the opposite. As a result, the critiques about Larsson’s political use for his work only serve to illustrate, rather than undermine, the argument that the art/entertainment divide is usually formulated in terms of use or purpose. In Berenson’s critique, his beliefs about how and why art should and can be useful become clear in his outright rejection of Larsson’s choice to focus on a political ideal, even in moments that do more discreetly point the reader to consider feminist issues. Clearly, for Berenson, the *purpose* of a piece is the single most important deciding factor as to whether or not he values it as a piece of art or not. For works that are primarily politically oriented, such as the *Millenium* trilogy, Berenson’s answer is unquestionably “no.”

Implications

Despite its subtlety in places, and use of formal means to underscore this central theme, the *Millenium* trilogy remains heavy-handedly and unapologetically political. The message here is clear: there are men who hate women, they act on that hatred, and they need to be stopped. Would Barthes then dismiss it as a text? Maybe, maybe not. But, to be sure, he admired some pieces that similarly contained political messages, especially those of German Marxist theorist and author, Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s artistic work, mostly plays

and novels, overwhelmingly focus on areas of Marxist concern, such as poverty, class suppression, and community; even his theory is clearly shaped by Marxist concern for the proletariat. And Barthes loved Brecht's work--experienced bliss in reading and watching it--maybe not because of its overarching political messages, but certainly in spite of them. At the very least, I think it's fair to argue that although *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* will almost certainly not produce bliss in every reader at every time--few, if any, texts do--it is not rendered incapable of doing so simply because it contains a political message. I doubt that Barthes would ultimately disagree.

If, then, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* can allow for the production of bliss as well as for the production of pleasure and even boredom, how can we qualify it as "merely popular literature"? Shores, along with many others, directly maps this reading experience to certain texts which are capable of producing it, the texts deemed "literature." But many resist applying that label to the novel, arguing that it cannot be placed in the same literary category as Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare. The impossibility of fitting it entirely into this category leads to the sort of equivocation evident at the end of Shores' piece, when he writes:

We read in order to have a further understanding of life and the people around us, which in turn gives us a better understanding of what we read. Like literature, good fiction can help change the ways in which we view the world. Larsson's crime fiction is Exhibit A.⁴⁷

In this final paragraph, in addition to confusing his terms ("popular fiction" has now simply become "fiction"), Shores begins to blur the lines between his two distinct categories in an

⁴⁷ Shores: 117.

attempt to define *The Millennium Trilogy* through them. He cannot let them go, and, as a result, struggles throughout the essay in his attempts to maintain those categories while discussing a book that, in many ways, defies each.

The reason I am suggesting is that the categories are not and cannot be absolute, as the same text can produce, or allow for the production of, such radically different reading experiences. When reading the *Millennium* trilogy some, like Kakutani, are bored by its incorporation of genre expectations; others, like Berenson, reject it for its political message; many others, including both Shores and myself, simply enjoy reading it. All are perfectly valid reading experiences, but their wide variety prevents classifying the novel into one specific category as based on its capacity to produce one reading experience or another. A debate attempting to do so cannot reach a fruitful conclusion; after all, one individual's reading experience will not be changed because someone else had a different one. Rather, a more productive conversation would be to discuss the differences in reader expectations, approaches, and practices that can lead to certain reading experiences--something along the lines of Warner's initial proposal in "Uncritical Reading."

4. Concluding Thoughts

The division between “art” and “entertainment” is not, as it turns out, entirely obsolete; nor is it as clear as it might seem if left unexamined. Despite the work of many theorists who have attempted to unpack and disbar this distinction, it continues to frame discussions in both academic and non-academic settings. These terms, and many others which appear to mean the same or nearly the same things are rarely--if ever--clearly defined by those who use them. An examination of the dictionary definitions, however, along with implications built in to many discussions around these two terms, seem to highlight that the division is at least partially based on a distinction between types of reading experiences.

That which is traditionally defined as “art” involves some reading experience perceived as somehow greater than solely pleasure, somehow changing the individual reader or promoting social, intellectual, emotional, or some other type of development; that is to say, it has *purpose*. Pieces that are seen as producing this type of experience have traditionally been valued over those that are perceived as producing, or aiming to produce, pleasure either solely or primarily; these are the pieces typically placed in the category of “entertainment.” This divide, however, merely reflects Foucault’s claims surrounding the Western pattern of subordinating pleasure to utility.

Underneath this division, however, lies a deeper question: is reading experience dependent on some quality within the piece itself? Although Barthes seems to contradictorily support first one and then the other answer to this question, the implicit understanding within *The Pleasure of the Text* is that it might somehow be both. And this, too, is my answer. Although a piece might encourage a certain sort of reading, thus a

certain sort of reading experience, the reader ultimately has control over his own approach. Warner's concept of uncritical reading serves as the perfect example--the same piece, read two different ways, can result in drastically different experiences.

In an attempt to ground these theoretical points in a singular piece, and the critical discussion around it, the *Millenium* trilogy by Stieg Larsson proves singularly invaluable. Its incredible success has sparked debates worldwide about its nature--to use Shores' terms, is it "literature" or merely "popular fiction"? The answer is, of course, both, or neither, or perhaps one or the other, depending on the individual being asked. This inconsistency between responses highlights my argument that any single piece cannot be predicted to regularly produce the same reading experience in two different readers, or even in the same reader at different times. Thus, any attempt to categorize pieces on this basis must ultimately prove fruitless.

How, then, can we frame discussions about reading experience? Perhaps a productive way to begin would be with a list of new questions to ask. One which Warner has already begun to answer: how does reading in one way as opposed to another alter reading experience? Classifications based on the answer to this question might ultimately prove helpful in guiding new ways to shape discourse around art, literature, or entertainment--whatever we decide to call it (and an examination and clarification of terms, though seemingly an insurmountable task, would certainly be helpful as well). But this question only leads to a laundry list of more: how do the reader's expectations shape reading experience? and how are these expectations formed--with cover art? reviews? in what ways does the world of the reader shape reading experience? what about past reading experience? Ultimately, some of the questions that come to mind do not seem

possible to theoretically answer, and any attempt to do so might prove highly subjective, not to mention time-consuming and frustrating. However, it is with this sort of seemingly insurmountable question that progress tends to be made, whether it is in answer the original question or simply in unearthing new ones.

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